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Forging an Inclusive Future in VET

OBESSU Policy Recommendations for European, National and Local Stakeholders

Introduction: The Imperative for Inclusive Learner Engagement in Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Vocational Education and Training (VET) plays a critical role within the European Union, equipping individuals with the skills necessary for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and personal development. To achieve true inclusivity, however, VET institutions must look beyond the classroom environment and foster meaningful learner engagement in all aspects of institutional life. Activism, participation in decision-making bodies, and involvement in student organisations are essential components of a learner's educational and civic growth.

These recommendations are founded on the evidence-based findings of the InclusiVET project[1]. The project identified significant gaps in equitable access to engagement opportunities, revealing that VET learners from non-traditional and underrepresented backgrounds often face substantial challenges that prevent them from participating fully. Their voices, talents, and perspectives remain underrepresented in institutional decision-making, limiting both their personal development and the institution's capacity for genuine inclusion.

Barriers across VET Systems & Deficiencies in the European Policy Framework

Effective policy is built on a clear understanding of the challenges it seeks to resolve. Diagnosing the root causes of underrepresentation in VET engagement is therefore a strategic imperative. This requires a dual focus: first, on the systemic barriers that individual learners face, and second, on the structural gaps within existing policy frameworks that allow these barriers to persist. Only by clearly identifying these issues can we craft targeted and impactful interventions.

While VET has rightly become a policy priority within the European Union, the framework concerning inclusion and learner engagement remains underdeveloped. The current policy emphasis tends to focus on making "core" learning and teaching more accessible, such as adapting curricula and classroom practices. While essential, these measures represent only one part of a truly inclusive approach. Meaningful inclusion requires a whole-institution strategy that embeds learner participation and representation at every level of the student experience.

A 2019 CEDEFOP report[2] highlighted a systemic lack of consultation with learners and a limited understanding of the barriers to their participation in decision-making.

[1] Inclusive Engagement of Underrepresented Students in Vocational Education & Training – InclusiVET project (2022-2025) - https://inclusivet.eu/

[2] Cedefop, Annual Report 2019, 28 Jul 2020 - https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4185_en.pdf

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Furthermore, existing systems of learner representation, where they do exist, appear primarily geared towards 'mainstream' learners—typically those who are white, middle-class, able-bodied, and studying full-time. This approach fails to account for the rich diversity within the VET learner population.

These gaps are reinforced by the 2023 CEDEFOP VET Policy Briefs[3], which note that national efforts to make VET systems more agile and attractive often outpace efforts to make them flexible and inclusive. The briefs also point to a trend where VET programs are increasingly aligned with industry and labour market needs, without necessarily responding to the diverse experiences and requirements of all VET learners. Having identified these systemic barriers and policy gaps, it is now possible to present a structured, strategic framework for addressing them effectively.

A Strategic Framework for Change: Five Pillars of Inclusive Engagement

The following recommendations are organized into a cohesive strategic framework comprising five core pillars. This framework is designed to address the previously outlined gaps by systematically embedding inclusivity throughout every aspect of VET provision. These pillars offer a comprehensive approach, moving beyond sporadic initiatives to foster a sustainable culture of engagement that benefits all learners.

The five strategic pillars for action are:

1. **Flexible and Recognisable Participation Opportunities**
2. **Increasing Visibility of Diversity**
3. **Strengthening Support Systems**
4. **Training Staff**
5. **Collaboration among Stakeholders**

[3] Cedefop, 2023 Vocational Education and Training (VET) Policy Briefs, 10 Jul 2024 - https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/unlocking-vet-cedefop-releases-2023-national-vet-policy-briefs

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The following sections will detail specific, actionable recommendations for each key stakeholder group — from European policymakers to local VET institutions— structured around these five pillars.

Recommendations for European Policymakers & Regional Stakeholders

European policymakers and regional stakeholders hold a unique position to shape a top-down policy environment that enables and encourages inclusive learner engagement across all Member States. Their role is to establish robust frameworks, direct funding, and foster a culture of collaboration that sets a high standard for inclusion in VET throughout the European Union.

Flexible and Recognisable Participation Opportunities:

- Strengthen existing and future policy frameworks —such as the forthcoming VET Strategy (2026)[4], the Council Recommendation on VET (2020)[5], the Herning Declaration (2025)[6] along its predecessor the Osnabrück Declaration (2020)[7], and the EQAVET Framework[8]— with specific indicators for learner engagement, accessibility, and the inclusiveness of the learning environment, targeting underrepresented learners.

- Advance ongoing efforts in active and democratic citizenship education within VET, building on established frameworks such as the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC)[9].

Increasing Visibility of Diversity:

- Support Member States and VET systems in their efforts to foster the visibility of diversity in VET and raise awareness on inclusive learner engagement by integrating these elements into relevant existing policy frameworks.

Strengthening Support Systems:

- Strengthen targeted funding streams, such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Youth Empowerment Fund, for INGOs and regional organisations advocating for underrepresented learners to cover initiatives addressing inclusion and learner engagement in VET systems.

- Leverage existing platforms to facilitate dialogue, peer learning, and the exchange of best practices among Member States, VET providers, student representatives, researchers, and social partners.

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[4] European Commission - DG EMPL, Skills for Jobs-Vocational Education and Training (VET) - https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/skills-jobs/vocational-education-and-training-vet_en

[5] Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience 2020/C 417/01, 24 Nov 2020- https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2020_417_R_0001

[6] OBESSU Publications on Herning Declaration (2025): a) Statement on the Herning Declaration - https://www.obessu.org/resources/documents/obessu-declarations/statement-on-the-herning-declaration/ & b) Position Paper Herning Declaration (co-signed with EAN) - https://www.obessu.org/resources/documents/obessu-position-papers/position-paper-obessu-ean-on-herning-declaration/

[7] Cedefop, From Osnabrück to Herning: Ministers Endorse Ambitious VET Declaration, 12 Jun 2025 - https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/osnabruck-herning-ministers-endorse-ambitious-vet-declaration

[8] European Commission, DG EMPL, European quality assurance in vocational education and training (EQAVET) Framework - https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/working-together/eqavet-european-quality-assurance-vocational-education-and-training_en

[9] Council of Europe, Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), 2016 and 2023 Review - https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture

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Training Staff:

- Support the formulation of a European Competence Framework for VET learners' support staff, defining the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to support diverse learners effectively.

- Promote the acquisition of competences related to democratic citizenship and European values in the initial and continuous professional development of all VET staff, from leaders to educators and trainers.

Collaboration among Stakeholders:

- Utilize existing fora, such as the EQAVET network and the European Education Area - Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training, to foster international cooperation and the exchange of best practices related to inclusivity and learner engagement.

- Ensure alignment between European VET processes and other key EU strategies concerning social inclusion, anti-discrimination, and youth engagement to create a coherent and mutually reinforcing policy landscape.

These European-level actions must be complemented by dedicated efforts at the national level to translate broad directives into concrete national action.

Recommendations for National Authorities, Social, and Civic Stakeholders

National authorities, in partnership with social and civic stakeholders, have the critical function of adapting and implementing European-level strategies into tangible national plans, legal frameworks, and quality assurance mechanisms. They are responsible for creating the domestic conditions that allow inclusive practices to take root and flourish within their VET systems.

Flexible and Recognisable Participation Opportunities:

- Review National VET Strategies and adapt National Implementation Plans (NIPs) with clear, measurable targets, timelines, and allocated resources to remove barriers to participation, ensuring this process is conducted in consultation with learners from underrepresented groups.

- Integrate learner engagement and inclusion indicators and monitoring mechanisms into national quality assurance tools, leveraging the European Quality Assurance in VET (EQAVET) framework.

Increasing Visibility of Diversity:

- Develop national guidelines for inclusive student council structures to support VET learner representative bodies in their efforts to promote diversity and foster inclusive representation.

- Invest in public outreach and awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes about VET and actively showcase the diversity of its learner population, promoting it as a valuable pathway for all.

Strengthening Support Systems:

- Review and adapt national legislative and regulatory frameworks to mandate the provision of adequate support systems. This must include legal guarantees for non-discrimination, reasonable

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accommodations for learners with disabilities and other specific needs, and a legal underpinning for student councils.

Training Staff:

- Strengthen initial and continuous professional development programs for VET staff to systematically address diversity, inclusion, and engagement gaps within their institutions, ensuring such training is regular and accessible.

Collaboration among Stakeholders:

- Foster partnerships between VET learner representatives, providers, social partners, and civil society organisations to co-develop and implement effective equity and inclusion policies.

- Collaborate closely with employers to ensure VET programs align with both the needs of the labour market and the diverse needs of learners, providing quality pathways to work-based learning for all.

Ultimately, the success of these national policies depends on their effective implementation at the institutional level, where theory is put into daily practice.

Recommendations for VET Institutions and Local Actors

VET institution leaders and local actors are on the front lines of implementation. They are responsible for cultivating an inclusive culture that directly combats the identified barriers of Visibility, Identification, and Accessibility, ensuring every learner feels valued and has a genuine opportunity to engage. Their commitment is essential to transforming policy into a lived reality for students.

Flexible and Recognisable Participation Opportunities:

- Actively support and empower learner representative bodies, providing them with the necessary autonomy, resources, and structured channels to meaningfully influence institutional decision-making, using tools such as learner-led reviews[10].

- Offer a variety of flexible participation opportunities beyond traditional roles and provide formal recognition for engagement through integration into curricula, academic credits for transversal skills, or financial incentives.

Increasing Visibility of Diversity:

- Ensure all institutional materials, from websites to publications, reflect the diversity of the learner population and actively promote diverse representation in leadership roles.

- Create or adapt formal inclusion strategies with concrete actions, using supportive resources that help guide both the leadership of the institution and student bodies. Actions can include assigning Diversity Officers, setting quotas aiming at boosting representation of underrepresented groups, and organizing regular events that celebrate cultural and social diversity.

[10] InclusiVET Project, Learner-Led review of Inclusive Learner Engagement in VET institutions - https://inclusivet.eu/learner-led-review/

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Strengthening Support Systems:

- Support community-based initiatives that connect the institution with vital support services for disadvantaged learners and foster student-led projects aimed at improving the school environment.

- Involve underrepresented learners in the evaluation and improvement of institutional support systems, providing formal recognition or compensation for their valuable contributions.

Training Staff:

- Ensure all staff receive training on inclusive pedagogy and are provided with the necessary resources and support to implement these practices effectively[11].

- Actively involve learners, particularly those from underrepresented groups, in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of staff training programs.

Collaboration among Stakeholders:

- Implement a whole-institution approach by actively involving learners, staff, parents, and carers in participatory bodies to foster synergy between formal and non-formal education.

- Enhance and promote the democratization of the institution by fostering learner engagement throughout all organizational and management processes, from initial planning to final evaluation.

These actions, when taken together, pave the way for a systemic and sustainable transformation of the VET landscape.

Conclusion: A Collaborative Path Towards Systemic Inclusion in VET

Achieving meaningful inclusion in Vocational Education and Training is not the responsibility of a single entity but a shared mission that requires coordinated, multi-level action. Lasting change depends on a unified commitment from stakeholders at the European, national, and institutional levels, all working in concert to dismantle barriers and build a more equitable system.

The five strategic pillars outlined in this document —providing flexible opportunities, increasing visibility, strengthening support systems, training staff, and fostering collaboration— offer a robust foundation for this collective effort.

They provide a clear and actionable roadmap for transforming VET into a space of genuine opportunity for all. We call on all stakeholders to commit to implementing these recommendations, ensuring that every VET learner can not only succeed academically but also flourish as an active, engaged, and valued member of their community.

[11] InclusiVET Project, InclusiVET online course for student support staff on inclusive learner engagement in Vocational Education & Training (VET) - https://inclusivet.academy.knowledgeinnovation.eu/

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About OBESSU

The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) represents school students in Europe since 1975 and has ever since been advocating for participatory, inclusive and quality education for all.

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